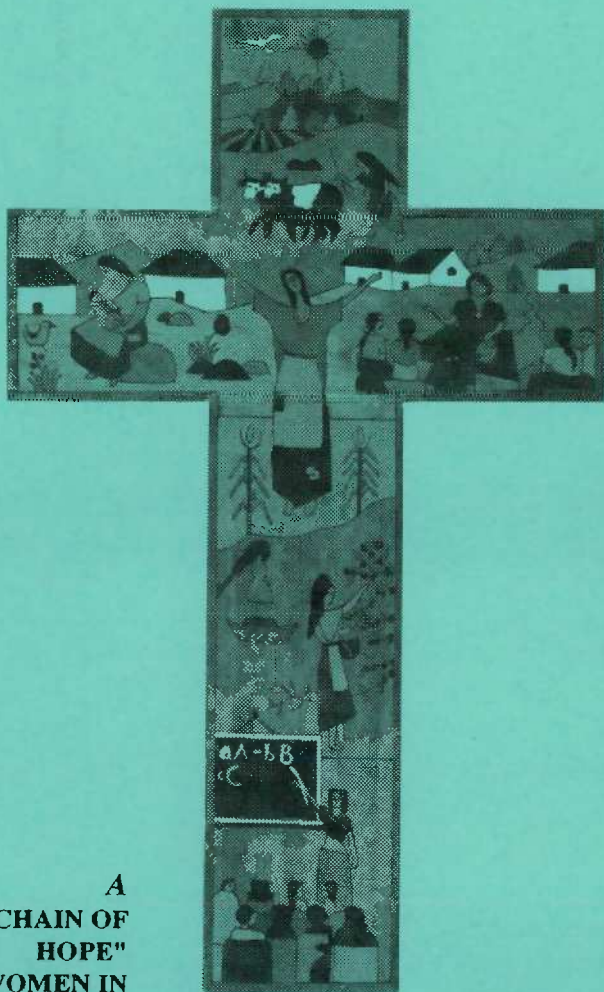


CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ  
CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA POR LA PAZ Y LA VIDA  
EN EL SALVADOR



A  
"CHAIN OF  
HOPE"  
FOR WOMEN IN  
EL SALVADOR

*by women from 21 countries  
who witnessed events  
during the civil war*

Written and compiled in 1990  
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EN EL SALVADOR**

**1 MAY - 9 JULY 1989**

**A "CHAIN OF HOPE" FOR WOMEN IN EL SALVADOR  
BY WOMEN FROM 21 COUNTRIES  
WHO WITNESSED EVENTS DURING THE CIVIL WAR**

**A  
COMMENTARY  
with  
DOCUMENTATION**

**Geneva, Switzerland  
June 1993**

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<sup>1</sup> It was unfortunately not possible to include a member from Panama.

<sup>2</sup> do., France

## INTRODUCTION

This is not just another publication about El Salvador, a country that has been in a war situation for many years and whose people long for peace, an end to the fighting, killing and torture, life in peace and dignity. There is enough detailed information on El Salvador's recent history.

This booklet, compiled and written in 1990, is to give account of a unique, singular action that took place in 1989:

A "Chain of Hope" for women in El Salvador by women from twenty-one different countries who visited El Salvador between 1 May and 9 July 1989.

It was conceived upon an appeal from the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) and became a joint action of the CLAI, World Council of Churches (WCC) and Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

The abduction and assassination of **María Cristina Gómez** on 5 April 1989 was yet another incident that fueled the need for action.

The visits to El Salvador were planned to take place while President Napoleón Duarte was still in power and before President Alfredo Cristiani was to take over after the victory of the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacional (ARENA) party. The aim was to be visibly present in El Salvador, to share in the life and experiences of the women from the different churches and organizations in the war-torn country, and to give testimony both in El Salvador and at home. It was to provide direct information, to be shared with the home churches and with the international community at regular intervals.

This Chain of Hope, the **CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ** has made a deep impression upon many people in El Salvador and certainly on the women who participated in it, and the churches and

agencies who sent them. They reported on what they saw and experienced during their short stay and what is going on now<sup>3</sup> when still no peace has come to El Salvador. The Chain of Hope has not changed things drastically, has not helped significantly to end the war or to stop persecution and suffering, but it has been a tremendous reinforcing act of solidarity with men and women in El Salvador, and abroad. It was done by women, basically for women. It was an effort made at short notice but with long-term effects. It was a truly ecumenical and truly international undertaking.

The Chain of Hope's aim was for the people, through witness, sharing of faith and hope, in solidarity and in a call for human rights. It had nothing to do with projects, programs or money. This is why a brief chronological record of this action is being kept to show what women can do when they are motivated and given a certain amount of freedom.

May God bless this Cadena de la Esperanza, this Chain of Hope, all those who have been or will be touched by it, and may He bless every effort to unite people for similar actions as visible signs of love, hope, faith and peace.

Christa Held  
Geneva, Switzerland

<sup>3</sup> Summer of 1990

## CREATION OF THE "CADENA"

The call for action and creation of the "Cadena" took place in the last weeks of the President Napoleón Duarte regime, and before President Alfredo Cristiani of the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacional (ARENA) party assumed power on 1 June 1989.

On 5 April 1989 at about 11 a.m. **María Cristina Gómez** a teacher and member of the teachers' union ANDES of El Salvador was kidnapped in front of her students as she came out of school; her body was found about one hour later on the outskirts of San Salvador.

**Cristina**, in her mid-forties, was most respected and cared for by her students and their families. Educated at the Baptist college, she was for many years active as a Sunday school teacher, youth counsellor, and deaconess of the Baptist church. During recent years her understanding and commitment moved her to work beyond the church and toward active support of women's rights, development and the struggle for peace and justice. **Cristina** participated in popular education, organization of women's conferences and seminars, and in marches to stop forced military recruitment and to demand a negotiated settlement to the Salvadoran civil war. Together with many sectors of Salvadoran society, she helped mobilize support for peace initiatives.

**Cristina** was shot four times in the chest and once in the head. Acid was poured on her. Her murder is seen as a clear message of what can happen to people who speak out, especially those who support women and other marginalized groups at risk in Salvadoran society. **Cristina** was the mother of four children who live with their father. She lived with her older sister whom she had always helped and protected. Her murder must be interpreted as a scandalous crime because of the brutality of the act itself, and as an implicit message directed to Salvadoran society as a whole.

During a visit to Geneva, Switzerland, by representatives of the CLAI, headed by its president, Bishop Federico Pagura of Argentina, and its general secretary, the Rev. Felipe Adolf, on 14 April 1989, a special appeal for help was made. The CLAI, WCC and LWF share a common commitment to the proclamation of the liberating Gospel of Christ in Latin

America today. Attention was devoted to the issue of human rights in Latin America and particularly in Central America. It was discussed how member churches of the CLAI and the ecumenical bodies could work together and support the ESQUIPULAS II peace plan for Central America. Of particular concern was the need for the churches to work together on behalf of justice and peace in El Salvador. It was agreed that:

the kidnapping, torture and assassination of María Cristina Gómez could not be accepted as simply one more in the long list of murders of persons committed to human rights in El Salvador.

Rather, the killing of this dedicated and highly respected woman should be remembered by the ecumenical community through intensified commitment to the work of justice in that country.

*(Excerpt of communiqué from the meeting of the CLAI and LWF on 14 April 1989.)*

The special appeal for help was made by the president of CLAI, Bishop Pagura, and Father Luis Serrano from the Episcopal Church in El Salvador. A small group of women came together for a meeting: Ana Langerak (Costa Rica), Silvia Schünemann (Brazil), Ana Villanueva (Argentina/Geneva), Dorli Schwab (Geneva), Jeannette Sylla (Geneva), and Christa Held (Geneva). It was emphasized that the physical presence and a very strong involvement of women should be the main elements of action for, and in El Salvador.

The proposal which was developed foresaw joint action by the CLAI, WCC and LWF. It was agreed to create a "CHAIN OF HOPE MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ - CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ" to be established as soon as possible. A visitation program should start already two weeks later, namely on 1 May 1989 and run uninterruptedly for ten weeks until 9 July 1989. There should be women from as many countries as possible and each team--made up of not less than two and not more than five members--should be composed ecumenically. For organizational reasons it was considered easier if each team were to come from one country or at least one region. Under the time pressure it was unfortunately not possible to include all continents.

The teams came from Latin America, Europe and North America,



countries from which it would be easiest to go to El Salvador, either because of physical closeness or because of no need for visas. Dates and countries were fixed. A contact person or agency had to be identified for each country. The tentative plan foresaw the following dates, countries and contacts:

| <b>Dates</b>     | <b>Country</b>                                | <b>Contact</b>                                              |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| May 1 - 7        | Ecuador                                       | CLAI                                                        |
| May 7 - 14       | Venezuela                                     | "Acción Ecuménica"                                          |
| May 14 - 21      | USA/Canada                                    | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Canada               |
| May 21 - 28      | Denmark/Finland/<br>Norway/Sweden             | The four LWF National Committees to appoint one coordinator |
| May 28-June 4    | Mexico                                        | Marta Benavides                                             |
| June 4 - 11      | Panama/Costa Rica                             | Ernesto Weigandt<br>Ana Langerak                            |
| June 11 - 18     | Federal Republic of Germany/France<br>Holland | Eva von Hertzberg                                           |
| June 18 - 25     | Brazil                                        | Silvia Schünemann                                           |
| June 25 - July 2 | Argentina<br>Paraguay/Uruguay                 | Ecumenical Women's Group Esperanza                          |
| July 2 - 9       | Team from the Ecumenical Center, Geneva       |                                                             |

In El Salvador one English-speaking person was needed to be responsible for the Cadena, and at permanent disposal of the groups. The women selected for the Cadena should have an understanding of the role of the churches in El Salvador in the present political situation, demonstrate sisterhood and solidarity with all women who fight against war, oppression and the disregard of human rights and who mourn over the

dead or nurture hope for the lives of those disappeared. There are many such examples of how women have shown enormous strength, sustained courage, and brought new life to a dwindling flame of hope. The groups were to stay one week in El Salvador, arriving and leaving on Sundays so that the groups could meet, so overlapping to form an uninterrupted chain. Once returned, they should be able to denounce the situation in El Salvador and give publicity to their experience.

Practical steps became necessary. The proposal had to be cleared with the general secretaries of the CLAI, WCC and LWF. It was necessary to appoint a "Cadena Task Force" (CTF) with a chairperson at the Ecumenical Center, seek approval of the proposal in El Salvador, establish a budget and submit it to the national committees and related agencies, approach the contact persons for the selection of the teams and make technical arrangements. The WCC and LWF constituencies had to be informed about the Cadena in various ways, background information had to be prepared for the teams.

The concrete proposal was formulated on 17 April 1989 and received the unreserved and wholehearted approval of the general secretary of CLAI (the Rev. Felipe Adolf) and the general secretaries of the WCC (Dr. Emilio Castro) and LWF (Dr. Gunnar Staalsett). On 18 April 1989 the group developed a tentative budget and discussed how to approach the different contact persons and particularly how to organize the first group from Ecuador to go to El Salvador.

On 20 April 1989, Dr. Staalsett appointed the LWF members of the CTF: Christa Held (Department of World Service/Community Development Service/CDS) chairperson; Janet McMahon/Bond-Nash (Communication); Jeannette Sylla (World Service/CDS); Dorli Schwab (Church Cooperation); Ana Villanueva (Studies). Because of heavy traveling schedules it was difficult to find members from the WCC, but the Rev. Anna Karin Hammar, head of the WCC Women's Desk, immediately joined the group.

### **Situation in El Salvador**

Meanwhile, events in El Salvador proved the seriousness of the situation. On 19 April 1989 the attorney general of El Salvador (General Dr. Roberto García Alvarado) was killed by a car bomb. This resulted in a

major crackdown on humanitarian organizations by the army and police. They laid siege to the headquarters of five popular organizations, entered with force and made mass arrests of all those inside. Approximately 100 persons, including many infants, sick people and a man in a wheelchair, were detained. Some of them were tortured, others released, two disappeared. The five organizations were the Displaced Persons Committee (CRIPDES), the Repatriates and Repopulation Committee (CNR which shares offices with CRIPDES), a trade union (FUSS), the Union of Unemployed and Laid-off Workers (CODYDES), and ADEMUSA (Association of Salvadoran Women). The FUSS, CODYDES and ADEMUSA share a house. Detainees released on 20 April 1989 said that they saw some of their friends being tortured by the Treasury police. They said this included severe beatings and dunking in cold water.

### **Biblical Motto**

The CTF started to meet regularly, and it was strongly felt that a biblical motto for the Cadena was necessary. Our colleague Ana Villanueva from Argentina presented a number of possible Bible texts. The CTF agreed that all of them were relevant and that they should be divided, so that each week every group would go under the Word of God for prayers in El Salvador, intercessions in the Ecumenical Center and prayers at home. One of them was selected as the motto for the whole Cadena, Josh. 1:9:

"Be strong and of good courage,  
be not frightened,  
neither be dismayed,  
for the Lord your God  
is with you wherever you go."

The others were the following:

May 1 - 7  
Ecuador

"And you will have confidence  
because there is hope."  
(Job 11:18)

|                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| May 7 - 14<br>Venezuela                                           | "Surely there is a regard for the righteous,<br>surely there is a God who judges on earth."<br>(Ps. 58:11)                                       |
| May 14 - 21<br>USA/Canada                                         | "Whom shall I send, and who will go for<br>us?" Then I said "Here I am! Send me."<br>(Isa. 6:8)                                                  |
| May 21 - 28<br>Denmark/Finland/<br>Norway/Sweden                  | "Blessed are those<br>who hunger and thirst for righteousness,<br>for they shall be satisfied."<br>(Matt. 5:6)                                   |
| May 28 - June 4<br>Mexico                                         | "Blessed are those<br>who are persecuted<br>for righteousness' sake,<br>for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<br>(Matt. 5:10)                    |
| June 4 - 11<br>Panama/Costa Rica                                  | "Because I preach the Good News,<br>I suffer and I am even chained<br>like a criminal.<br>But the Word of God is not in chains."<br>(2 Tim. 2:9) |
| June 11 - 18<br>Federal Republic<br>of Germany/France/<br>Holland | "Indeed, all who desire to live a goodly life<br>in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...."<br>(2 Tim. 3:12)                                        |
| June 18 - 25<br>Brazil                                            | "But be doers of the Word,<br>and not hearers only,<br>deceiving yourselves."<br>(James 1:22)                                                    |

|                   |                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| June 25 - July 2  | "And the harvest of righteousness  |
| Argentina         | is sown in peace                   |
| Paraguay          | by those who make peace."          |
| Uruguay           | (James 3:18)                       |
| July 2 - 9        | "If you know that he is righteous, |
| Group from        | you may be sure that               |
| Ecumenical Center | every one who does right           |
|                   | is born of him."                   |
|                   | (I John 2:29)                      |

A practical question arose: This was a joint action of three agencies--whose stationery should be used? The group decided to create its own, and found a very meaningful symbol: a long line showing a circle, the women's sign, and an uninterrupted chain. From then on, thankful for the freedom given, we used this stationery and only altered the letter-head when the name of the Cadena changed after the final evaluation in El Salvador.

On 25 April 1989 a response was received from El Salvador that the Cadena was very welcome and that DIACONIA (Ecumenical Coordination of Service and Humanitarian Aid of El Salvador) would act as coordinator in El Salvador. On 26 April a letter went out to those who had been suggested as possible coordinators in their country or region. They were asked to organize a team of women who would go to El Salvador on the suggested dates. The dates could not be changed as it was important that the chain not be broken at any time. They were asked to confirm by the fastest possible means their willingness to be the coordinators.

Each Cadena member was expected to be aware of the risk involved in going to El Salvador on such a mission. At least one person in each team should be known in wider circles, having a public and/or church status, as such a person would allow for greater impact on the Salvadoran authorities and serve as protection for the team.

The two official languages of the Cadena would be English and Spanish. The more team members able to speak Spanish, the better, but for feed-back reasons at least one member in each team should be able to speak English.

Because of the urgent and ecumenical character of this action, in some cases it would not be possible to go through "regular" channels, but the coordinators should take the necessary steps to approach the appropriate church bodies in their countries.

The final number of persons participating would be determined by the result of the fund-raising effort. It was necessary to investigate the cheapest air fares. A group insurance for all team members was provided. It had to be investigated if members of the teams needed a visa for El Salvador, and if so, immediately request the individuals to apply for one. The motif given for the visa should be "tourism." The participants were asked to contact their Office for Foreign Affairs and to inform them about their participation in the Cadena, and to inform the embassy of their country in El Salvador about their mission and arrival.

One team member would be responsible for reporting. Each team would send a telefax message from El Salvador, while there, to Geneva, containing a resumé of the visit and any indications that might be useful to the ulterior teams. A longer and more complete report should be sent during the week following the visit, in English or Spanish.

It was recommended that all participants be very careful regarding notes taken during the visit; not to use names, indications or references that might endanger the people they would meet. They were informed that it was planned to establish and publish a report on their experiences. This has been done in two different editions. (*Seguimiento No. 1* and 2, in English and Spanish)

On 24 April 1989, funding appeals were sent out to the Federal Republic of Germany, the Scandinavian countries, the United States and Canada. Information was shared in the Ecumenical Center and with different agencies, and Muriel Julliard (WCC, Human Rights) joined the CTF. On 26-27 April 1989 work continued on the letter to the contact persons, background information material, and development of the Cadena stationery.

A number of responses had come in by the end of April from different contact persons. To facilitate the work, five different CTF persons assumed responsibilities for the entire follow-up in the different countries:

Dorli Schwab and Jeannette Sylla for Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica. Janet McMahon/Bond-Nash for the USA and Canada, Anna Karin Hammar for Scandinavia and Germany, and Ana Villanueva for Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. The enthusiasm, willingness and spontaneous assistance from every single CTF member was overwhelming.

On 28 April 1989 the members--mostly women--of sixteen different organizations in El Salvador sent an "Open Letter to Women in Churches and International Organizations" (*translated from Spanish*):

Dear Sisters and Friends,

We, the undersigned, want to let you know that for the last ten years we have been suffering a civil war by which we women feel we have been much more affected due to the forced absence of sons, husbands and family members.

Because of this reality we have had to play the roles of mother, wife and head of the family, and we have assumed them with responsibility while working together with our people for the triumph of peace with social justice.

Throughout the ten years of conflict, we have been affected by detentions, disappearances, murders, torture, defamatory campaigns and death threats. But since last January, a systematic campaign has been launched, one which aims at annihilating any type of women's organization....

They then made particular reference to activities between January and April and to a march on 6 January 1989 by the MSM (Salvadoran Movement of Women), ADEMUSA and FECMAFAM (Federation of Committees of Mothers and Family Members of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Killed Persons of El Salvador) against forced recruitment. This march was broken up by the First Infantry Brigade with tear gas, bullets and beatings, and resulted in the detention of thirty women and three youths who accompanied the march. Half of the detainees were liberated the following morning, and the rest of them transferred to the quarters of the national police. They were detained for four days at the women's prison of Ilopango.

They further refer to the capturing and killing of María Cristina Gómez on 5 April 1989 and the action on 19 April 1989 against a number of organizations, particularly the CRIPDES, FUSS and ADEMUSA in which some sixty persons were detained from the CRIPDES and eleven women and four men from the ADEMUSA.

They ask for protests to the Salvadoran government by churches and governments to these violations of human rights and women's dignity, stronger pressure upon El Salvador to not just formally comply with the ESQUIPULAS II peace plan commitments, and for the rejection of violence and military solutions. They call for protests against human rights violations, especially sexual aggression which is implemented as a way of torture, principally against women. In particular, they ask:

We request your presence in solidarity with El Salvador through visits of delegations of women and international organizations that defend the rights of the woman.

Organize campaigns of information through your churches and solidarity groups, making known the situation confronting the women and more generally the people of El Salvador.

As women's organizations, send letters and telegrams of solidarity to the various Salvadoran women's groups, express your repudiation of these deeds to the government and armed forces of El Salvador and the US Embassy in your country.

Express your support by speaking out and acting for a political and negotiated solution to the conflict as the only reasonable alternative for the building of lasting peace with social justice, and

In the name of men and women in El Salvador, we thank you for all the moral support and actions that could contribute to stopping the bloodshed and the many attacks on the civilian population.

WOMEN WALKING TOWARDS PEACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.  
SILENCED WOMEN WILL NEVER BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

This came as a forceful affirmation of the plan for the **CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA**.



## TEAM I - ECUADOR, MAY 1-7

The CTF, busy in Geneva, got a tremendous boost from a message from Ecuador:

Where are you? We are ready, our team is composed: 5 women from the Lutheran Church, Iglesia del Pacto, Catholic Church, Assembly of God and the United Evangelical Churches.

A fax from El Salvador on 2 May 1989 announced:

The first delegation of the Cadena arrived today. Met at airport by Baptist Association. Meeting mid-day with ecumenical committee working on the visits. Programs still being organized on this end, though well along now in planning. Principal point of coordination will be DIACONIA. We are grateful to God and to all who have heard this cry of the people of El Salvador. May God use this effort to assist in bringing about peace, justice and understanding here and elsewhere. God Bless your efforts.

On 6 May 1989 a similar message stated:

This group has been excellent according to the impressions of the different churches and institutions to whom they have related. They had patience, good understanding of the situation, important observations regarding the program, and have shown much Christian love and solidarity. More couldn't have been imagined. There will be an evaluation with the Salvadoran coordination committee, composed by the host churches.

*[During the final evaluation, when the last group from the Ecumenical Center was in El Salvador, much was learned about the tremendous efforts that had to be made within the country to attend uninterruptedly to the arrangements for the ten different groups of people. Some problems arose, but many blessings resulted from this Chain of Hope.]*

The members of this first delegation, from Ecuador, immediately began publishing a number of articles.

We quote from one, sent to *Newsweek*, titled:

### The Churches under attack in El Salvador

"Take off your crosses before going through immigration"--was the last word of advice to our delegation. "Any sign of connection with the church could be seen as subversive." At the height of the death squad activity in 1980, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, bishop of San Salvador, was murdered. Now, with the recent election of the presidential candidate of the ultra conservative ARENA party, repression is escalating. Gunfire can be heard nightly in some parts of the capital. In this country, where any kind of popular or ecclesiastical organization is seen as subversive, the church is again under attack. The Lutheran minister of the Resurrection Church in San Salvador has received three death threats since January. The politics of the Christian Democrats have failed. The ARENA party, with substantial influence in the legislature since last year, is in direct control of the death squads. Due to assume power on 1 June 1989 they have already stepped into the power vacuum left by the dying Duarte. Their lack of a popular mandate winning 53 percent of votes, but on a turnout of little more than one third of the national population of voting age (Catholic University, San Salvador) goes hand in hand with a controlled use of terror....

They made lengthy reference to the death and testimony of María Cristina (Cristi) Gómez:

Cristi was kidnapped in front of her students as she came out of school on 5 April 1989. Forced into a Cherokee jeep, acid was poured on her, one of her arms was broken and her face mutilated. She was shot four times in the chest and once in the head. One hour later, an ex-Jesuit friend, a priest, found her body dumped at the side of the road on the edge of the city.

What was her crime? Was it her statement read on national radio calling for women to defend their rights, to struggle for equality and to help build peace in this war-torn country? Was it her

participation in March in the anniversary of the assassination of Monseñor Romero whom she loved and respected as a priest and prophet? Or was it her involvement with the CONAMUS (National Coordination of Salvadoran Women)?

At 47 years of age, **Cristi** was hardly a rebel "comandante." The mother of four children, deacon in the Baptist church, and a teacher in the Baptist school, she had been drawn into a life where to tell the truth signified danger. Not since Romero's death has the church had such involvement in the struggle for human rights.

Their report stressed that:

...not only Salvadorans are at risk; on the day of the elections, three international journalists were killed. Among the sixty [or more] people abducted on 19 April 1989 from one single organization (CRIPDES), were Canadian, Australian and German volunteers, who were tortured for four hours. An entrance visa to the country is no guarantee of immunity from the death squads where all kinds of popular organizations, including church and women's movements are all regarded as friends of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). In contrast to the repressive politics of the government stands the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace," a broad-based movement of more than 100 university, labour, professional, women's and grass-roots organizations. The "National Debate for Peace" provides a unique possibility of legitimate political discussion. Its aim is to find an end to the civil war through negotiated peace.

Another article called "Solidarity in Pain and Hope" first describes the Cadena and then gives some details about **Cristi Gómez** (*translated from Spanish*):

**Cristi** was murdered for committing the worst of crimes: to defend life. Because of all this,

- after having heard the testimonies of her children who no longer mourn her death but celebrate her presence in each

Salvadoran woman and man who fights for the cause for which she died;

- after having shared communion with the brothers and sisters of churches which assume their engagement to walk with the suffering people, without losing the hope of a life of justice and peace;
- after having met and heard the women who participate in many organizations, their courage and strength, not to give up despite the threats, pressure and torture, and more than anything else;
- after having known a bleeding people occupied by military forces, hundreds of widows and thousands of orphans;
- after feeling so close to the loneliness, the pain, the anguish and along with them the faith, the hope and the firm decision of defending life, even if risking one's own, we as women and as Christians have to say:
- after having been in El Salvador we cannot keep silent about all we have seen, heard and felt, for the necessity of saying it grows within ourselves so that more and more people know it and speak out to the world their rejection of such violations of human rights and their demand for the respect of life.

**TEAM II - VENEZUELA, MAY 8-14**

The second group in El Salvador from 8-14 May 1989 was composed of women from the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches in Venezuela. One member of the Ecuadoran delegation stayed behind and met with the group from Venezuela. They obtained information from families of "repobladores" (people who went back to their villages despite the war) displaced women, mothers whose sons went into exile, are dead or crippled because of the war, family members of political prisoners, ecclesiastical and popular institutions, the Baptist, Episcopal and Lutheran churches, the ecclesial base communities, Catholic parishes, representatives of the "National Debate for Peace" and a number of institutions and groups of women organized for legal aid, and such.

They were deeply moved by reports about the bombing of civilian villages; massacres of peasants, children, women and elderly people; military presence which does not allow peasants and "repobladores" to work in their fields; the fate of political prisoners who are kept in very bad conditions; physical and psychological torture of detainees as a way of obtaining confessions; and conservative attitudes in the Catholic church. They also denounced the activities of the evangelical pastor Juan Bueno who "blesses the army weapons and works as the chaplain of the Naval School, appearing in public with an impressive military escort."

They were concerned that the government had withheld money and food sent to victims of the 1986 earthquake which was used by the military. They said too much of the national budget is used in military spending at the neglect of education and health. Obligatory military service is a law imposed only on the poor. Recruitment is forced.

They very much supported the wish of the Salvadoran sisters to exert pressure upon the US Embassy and the Salvadoran national government to work toward the establishment of peace. They put strong emphasis on demands for the release of the political detainees before 1 June 1989, especially a number of women who were in Ilopango prison during the time of their visit. They mentioned these women by name and requested messages be sent to President Napoleón Duarte, to Colonel Emilio

Ponce (Estado Mayor de las Fuerzas Armadas) and the US Embassy in El Salvador. They called for support for popular women's organizations and promotion of the campaign "Year of Solidarity with Central America, Monseñor Romero" initiated for the tenth anniversary of his murder by the ecclesial base communities.

During their stay, there was an innovation in the practice of Salvadoran churches, and an achievement toward unification of women from various sectors and churches: an ecumenical service in the Cathedral of San Salvador on 10 May 1989. The worship was prepared by women and led by representatives of the Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal and Catholic Churches, and the Christian Reformed Confession. Representatives of each of the people's women's organizations of El Salvador read passages from the Bible. The themes of prayer and Bible study were:

"The Mother, Gift of God" (Gen. 1:26-28 and Luke 1:46-55)

"The Mother, Suffering Servant" (John 19:25-28)

"The Mother, Artisan of Life" (Apocal. 12:1-6)

"The Mother, Artisan of Peace" (Isa. 65:17-25)

The women from Venezuela with their beautiful voices formed a choir to animate the service with songs of hope. This was one of the many gifts of human and Christian solidarity which women gave to people in El Salvador.

Upon their return to Venezuela a number of activities took place and publications were produced. Talks were given to various groups and solidarity committees. The written report of the group was copied and distributed in Caracas. The largest publication was a substantial article in the newspaper *El Nacional* with 500,000 copies, the biggest daily of Venezuela. A lengthy article also appeared in the magazine *Presencia Ecuμένηca*. The group remained very concerned about the fate of the women whom they visited in prison and whose release they requested so urgently.

**TEAM III - UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA  
MAY 13-21**

The North American group was in El Salvador from 13-21 May 1989. They came from the Church of the Brethren, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Anglican Church in Canada, the Lutheran Church in Canada, and from the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. They wrote:

Representatives of women's organizations, church groups and human rights organizations repeatedly told us that our presence in El Salvador strengthened and encouraged them at this critical time, approaching the June 1 inauguration of Alfredo Cristiani as president of El Salvador. The days before June 1, both Salvadorans and internationals expressed fear that the repression will increase under the leadership of Cristiani's ARENA party. Indeed, what we saw and heard indicates that the repression is already increasing.

Churches all over the world responded to support women in El Salvador by setting up a "Chain of Hope." The Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and the Latin American Council of Churches are sponsoring ten delegations of women from other Latin American countries, Europe and North America to provide a continual presence of international conscience in El Salvador during the sensitive period over the official transfer of power to the new president.

A recent delegate to El Salvador, Laura Glynn, a Maryknoll nun working for the Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights in Ecuador reported:

When talking with political prisoners in the women's jail we heard chilling accounts of kidnappings, rape, torture.... Among those abducted (from a local center, the Christian Committee Pro-Displaced) were children, pregnant women and sick people.... There are signs that the new ARENA government plans to enforce a so-called

"peace" through terrorization of those who yearn for equality, solidarity and freedom.

Another woman delegate tells of a 20-year-old peasant refugee tortured for four days because she refused to admit that she was a terrorist. Her only involvement in the Saldadoran war had been her care for refugees within a church organization:

I am still amazed at the stamina of this young woman who had even been hung briefly by her breasts. When or if she is released, she plans to continue to struggle for a negotiated peace with thousands of Salvadoran women. The courage of the ordinary people we met was extraordinary. The day after Cristi's murder, although sick with fear from police harassment, her co-workers returned to work as usual, determined to show that despite their weakness they were not going to be broken. Terror is a part of everyday life in El Salvador. In my bedroom in the Lutheran guest house in San Salvador I was kept awake every night by intermittent shooting. A deep impression which remains with us is of the overwhelming courage and commitment of ordinary women.

So many men have been killed that women may now make up over 60 percent of the population. Women, the givers of life, are now speaking out for issues of life. They have been among the most vocal and visible in campaigning for an end to forced recruitment. It has been their young sons (from 13 years on) who now are herded into military trucks and taken to the battle zone. Women as nurturers, responsible for feeding and finding shelter for children, have had an even more difficult role during the past decade of civil war. Women are very involved in the forefront in working for a negotiated peace, for them and for their families. In this country, divided by armed struggle there is a crying need for new ways to build bridges and make peace.



In El Salvador the cross still stands out above the shadow of the gun. The role of the church in reconciliation has been costly. The words of Monseñor Romero could be Christ's message:

"I bid you, I beg you, I ask you in the name of God to cease this repression."

Like Romero and many others, Christl gave her life for a vision of El Salvador at peace with itself. Her assassination was an attempt to break the strength of the popular movement embodied in her. The war may go on, but thousands of ordinary people will continue the task before them, more aware of the tenuousness of their lives, yet united in their goal to bring about a negotiated peace based on justice for all in El Salvador.

The current Salvadoran reality is marked by a chilling visible military presence in the capital and in the countryside and increased pressure on popular organizations including women's groups and unions. The offices of these organizations have been raided. Equipment, files and material have been seized and group members detained, interrogated and tortured by the Treasury police, and sent to prison.

In the three weeks between March 1989 (when Cristiani was elected) and April 5 (when María Cristina Gómez was assassinated), the Non-Governmental Human Rights Commission documented 152 assassinations, seventy-four detentions and eleven disappearances.

During our week, seven campesino families from the Panchimilama re-population area were brought to the Lutheran church in San Salvador. When we met these families, they told us that they had been in the process of constructing homes and planting their corn when the military ordered them to leave, because they didn't belong in the area. Two of the men were captured by the military and tortured. We saw the fresh wounds of one of the tortured victims. The seven families are staying temporarily in a building owned by the Lutheran church until they can find somewhere else

to live. We met them there with their children, their building materials, their beds, their hogs and their chicken.

On Friday, a representative of the Baptist Association told us that two Mennonite church workers from the United States were denied re-entry into El Salvador although they had permanent residence in the country. Government officials confiscated the couple's residence cards at the airport.

On Sunday, we worshiped at the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, where a Disciples of Christ missionary from the United States was preaching in the absence of Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto. Later in the day, the military stopped the missionary's vehicle in front of the house where we were staying, accused the missionary's wife of taking a picture of a soldier and exposed her film. Shortly afterward, a soldier searched our jeep in front of the house.

The people of El Salvador often used the words "in spite of" when concluding their presentations. In spite of ten years of violence and war, in spite of intimidation and harassment, in spite of poverty, in spite of detention, torture and death, the people we met are committed to struggle for peace with justice.

One of María Cristina Gómez's four children said this to us: "What she began, we must finish." Those words reflect the energy and will that Salvadoran people still have.

The group committed itself:

Upon return to the United States and Canada to tell the story of the women of El Salvador, a story we experienced through the eyes of women who have organized themselves as women's and church groups. We are committed to tell the story to our political representatives as well as to our churches and our women's networks.

They further urged the WCC, LWF and their own churches to make strong appeals for the release of thirteen women, from popular organizations, arrested on 19 May 1989, tortured by the Treasury police and still being

held in Ilopango prison. They urged that telegrams be sent to President Napoleón Duarte, President-elect Alfredo Cristiani, Colonel Heriberto Hernández (Policía de Hacienda) and to United States Ambassador William Walker in San Salvador.

They urge the LWF, WCC and CLAI to consider extending the Chain of Hope to provide an ecumenical international presence of women, as long as the government permits such a presence. They also send greetings to the church section of the "National Debate for Peace" and a taped message for the women's radio program in El Salvador.

In Geneva the CTF continued contact with the coordinators of the different groups, and organized a tray lunch on 18 May 1989 to inform people in the Ecumenical Center about the progress of the Cadena. Articles appeared in *Lutheran World Information* (LWF news service.)

On 21 May 1989 information was received that the National University of El Salvador was under threat of military intervention. Over the past few months the university's officials and students had been under heavy surveillance. On Friday, 19 May 1989, Attorney Ismael Castillo, a director of legal affairs at the university was abducted by heavily armed men. His whereabouts were unknown.

The National University of El Salvador was founded nearly 150 years ago and is the only public university in the country. "La Nacional," as it is called in Spanish, has traditionally been a haven for intellectual freedom and political activism. As an autonomous institution, the university is theoretically beyond the reach of the armed forces and government-imposed censorship. Recently the university community has played a key role in sponsoring public debate on national issues, such as human rights violations, the economic crisis and prospects for a political solution to the nine-year old civil war. Appeals were made, expressing concern for the well-being of Mr. Castillo and the integrity of the university community.

Following the appeals of the Venezuelan and North American Cadena groups to El Salvador, letters of protest to different people also were sent by the general secretaries of the LWF and WCC.

On 31 May 1989 the first summary report (*Seguimiento No. 1*) on the CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA was completed, (English/Spanish) and mailed to all its coordinators and supporters.

**TEAM IV - DENMARK, FINLAND, NORWAY AND SWEDEN  
MAY 21-28**

From 21-28 May 1989 a group of four women from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden went to El Salvador. Their general impression was that the people's situation was inhuman on all levels, socially, politically and economically. A strong polarization was growing between the army and the FMLN. They got the impression that the "bomb" might explode at any moment and in any form.

They described in detail a number of events, especially an encounter with one of the most prominent detainees in the women's prison in Ilopango: 28-year-old Reina Isabel Hernandez, head of the CRIPDES, charged with possession of a weapon and cooperation with the FMLN.

She gave a detailed account of what had happened on 19 April 1989 when the office was suddenly surrounded by police:

They thumped on the door and demanded to be let in. As we knew how the police treats popular organizations, we refused to open. With us were old people, newborn babies, pregnant women and patients suffering from various diseases. Some of them fainted from fear.

In order to avoid isolation we tried with a megaphone to call the national and international press, humanitarian organizations and others who might be able to help us. We also appealed to the military to stop the suppression. We had nothing to hide. The CRIPDES is a legal group trying peacefully to improve the living conditions of people who have been forcefully resettled.

But the police were not to be convinced. At 23:30 they forced their way into our office and pulled and pushed us about, we were sixty persons altogether, to be put into a lorry outside. We were taken to the customs police headquarters blindfolded, with our hands tied behind our backs. They put us against a wall in a group of three, noted names, addresses, dates of birth etc. and then began discussing how they would divide the torture tasks between them.

They called me "the loud one" and every time one of the soldiers passed by, he hit my head or kicked my back. Then they pulled me into a room where I was received with the phrase "it's her." For two hours they kept asking me the same questions: "Where was I born?" "How old was I?" "Where did my family live?" etc. Then they wanted to know something about the CRIPDES and I did not hide the fact that I was the leader of the group. They asked the same questions about ten times, hitting my head all along.

Later on they insisted that everything I had said was untrue. They already knew the whole truth, they said: I had been with the guerrillas for two months in Cerros de San Pedro to prepare the refugees in Honduras to join the war.

I insisted that I was telling the truth, and they became even more threatening. They stuck something which felt like knives in different parts of my body, took off my clothes and shoes and began to pull at my handcuffs while hitting my head and my back. They then let me put on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts and made me sign two blank pieces of paper.

After that they took me back to the others who were still standing along the wall. The seance started all over again. The CRIPDES is allied with the FMLN, they claimed, and a new and tougher time of torture began. This carried on, with increasingly tougher methods, for about forty-eight hours. The only drink I had was what I had stolen out of the toilet bowl when I was permitted to go to the toilet. We had nothing to eat, my stomach was aching and I had a terrible headache following all the blows. At one stage it felt as if they were playing football with my head on the floor. At the same time my nerves were on edge because I could hear how my friends were screaming from their torture.

On the morning of April 21, we were left in a bathroom, but they kept hitting and kicking us every time they passed by. Once in a while they would ask us if we would go back to our work in the CRIPDES - and whenever anyone said yes, they would be thrashed

soundly. That day, however, we were offered water and a bit of food.

Later the same day we were forced to sign confessions that we were not permitted to read. Ten of us were then put before a judge who told us what we had signed. I told the judge everything about the torture and that the confession was false, and demanded a doctor's examination to verify my statement. At 17:30 seven of us were taken to Ilopango prison, charged with illegal possession of a weapon and contact with the FMLN. We have never had arms at the CRIPDES, and have never cooperated with the FMLN, so even though we are formally criminal prisoners, we are in reality political prisoners.

We have now obtained a special status in the prison. A few days ago, we were permitted to sleep in the same dormitory instead of being spread all over the place. I am sorry that I cannot show you our dormitory, we are only allowed to receive guests in the open air. The personnel seems to treat us with more respect than the criminal prisoners, and we have been given a corner of the "park" where the others are not permitted to go. So in this prison we are recognized as political prisoners.

The group also gave a special account of a visit to women in the slums of San Salvador who had started to build a school by themselves. The state was doing nothing. With help from a congregation, they managed to build a temporary shed with three classrooms and succeeded in getting the public authorities to hire five teachers for the 300 children in the slums.

The Scandinavian group was particularly exposed to some of the fighting and had some nightmare experiences. One of the reports says:

Late in the afternoon I was at the Catholic University where the Spanish-born liberation theologian Jon Sobrino inspired and provoked his audience, speaking about the Third World's advantages compared to those of the First World.

A driver from one of the churches I visited was waiting outside. He usually looked happy and smiling, but when I came out from

the meeting with Sobrino, I met a pale man with clenched teeth. He had lost his car. While we had been fascinated by Sobrino's words, two armed members of the guerrilla had asked him whether they could "borrow" the car. He had been given a telephone number. At 19:30 he was supposed to call to hear where he could retrieve the car. He was sure that he would get the car back if it really was guerrillas who had taken it. They always kept their word regarding borrowed cars, whereas the army always kept them. His worry was mainly that if the car was seen during a guerrilla attack, the police could claim that the church was involved in the attack.

We hailed a taxi, but did not get very far. Two men stopped the car and advised us to change direction. There was heavy fighting a bit further ahead, he said. The driver claimed assertively that he was not afraid, on the other hand he did not want to be responsible for driving a foreign woman into the battle zone. We had to find somewhere else to go.

I was at that time staying in a guest house in one of the conflict zones, next door to the First Brigade (army barracks). When I called the guest house to ask whether the situation was as bad as we had been told, the background noises and the shaky voice convinced me that it indeed was. They were all lying under their beds, caught between the bullets of the brigade and the guerrillas.

Some hours later the situation seemed to be calmer so we ventured out on the street to go back to the guesthouse, but we had to drive via narrow side roads, and before each turn in the road, the lights were turned off. We managed to get indoors before the next bomb exploded. From the windows we could see the Red Cross arrive. We soon agreed that somehow we had to get rid of all the material from different organizations we had with us. After the explosions the town was blacked out, so burning the papers outside was excluded. We couldn't dispose of them down the toilet either, because there was never any water at that time of the day. A bright suggestion was to put all the pamphlets, tapes and articles in someone's black stockings and put them out on the



roof. We were now ready for the house search we all expected. But the search did not take place. After a few more bomb explosions next morning, the electric current came back. We pulled the papers back inside. They were quite wet as it had been raining all night.

Outside the house a happy driver was waiting for us. "The boys" had called in the morning. He could go and pick up the car. On the way back to the LWF World Service office we could see that the town was trying to get back to normal, following the night's events. People were busy trying to find out who was missing after the clashes. The police and military had obviously taken the opportunity to crack down on popular organizations.

One woman informed us that her husband had gone to a meeting in the agricultural cooperative COACES the evening before, their offices were now occupied by police and she knew for sure that neither he nor the other members had left the building by themselves.

Together with a Swedish doctor and a project leader we tried to go and see what was going on. The road was blocked. A guard of about fourteen years very nervously told us that it was not up to him to decide whether we could enter the building. We had to talk to the commander who wanted to know whom we represented and accepted our rather vague answer: "The Church."

The Lutheran Church has been accused of collaborating with the guerrillas and its bishop is called a communist. Although we were promised that we could go into the building to look for the people we were searching, this did not prove possible. We were turned away and heard that later in the afternoon people were allowed to leave the building, but that in the evening several prominent members were arrested in their homes.

**TEAM V - MEXICO, MAY 28 - JUNE 4**

The fifth group was composed of four women from Mexico. They represented the Methodist, Catholic and Lutheran churches. Although normally the program foresaw a number of visits to different organizations, this group reported that during their stay in El Salvador the group was not able to share the living conditions of the population of the town for security reasons:

We were accommodated in a hotel in a residential area which was considered to be at low risk. This was to avoid any problems due to strikes and possible action, be it by the FMLN or from extreme right groups.

As a result, some activities foreseen could not be carried out, i.e. a meeting with members from the FECMAFAM. The visit to some cooperatives, creches and workshops supported by different churches promoting the Cadena was not feasible. On Tuesday morning, May 30, on the way to the CONAMUS office, members of the uniformed police came to ask for the coordinator of the CONAMUS and kept on watching the street where the office is located. We therefore arrived late at the meeting which we had with members of the committee of the "National Debate for Peace."

The circumstances under which we visited the country, the distances we covered in the city and the conversations we had with a number of organizations and churches, with political prisoners at the Ilopango prison and members of the María Gómez family revealed the following:

The Salvadoran population in general lives in great poverty. People do not have the minimum financial resources to cover their basic needs of food and even less the family expenses to live with dignity. The government does not respond to any request related to housing, education, infrastructure or food. The existing services are totally deficient. Employment possibilities have been taken away without being replaced by new ones. All these problems get worse due to the war situation which forces many people

to flee their villages and settle in the capital, aggravating the belts of misery. They try to avoid the suppression of the army, accusing the peasants of being part of, or of collaborating with, the guerrillas.

We received many testimonies of serious human rights violations by the army or the death squads. Fleeing from the rural area, or being unable to cultivate the land due to the presence of the military or armed groups, there is a great lack of food which earlier was produced within the country. Today food is being imported and out of reach for many because of the high prices.

As a consequence of the war and the forced and violent recruitment, sixty-five percent of Salvadoran heads of family are women. As they lack preparation and training, due to the "machismo" and the large number of children, it is particularly the displaced women who do not get any work, which increases the misery in the family. There are many orphans and only a small number of organizations to attend to them.

The violation of the human rights of women is worse than in other Latin American countries. Captured women are tortured, beaten, violated by the military and their security groups. When women look for a job or try to keep it, they suffer sexual harassment.

They recommend that it would be good if the coming delegations would include a journalist for better reporting about the problems and suffering of the Salvadoran population and how organizations are persecuted. They also recommend that women participating in the Cadena should be informed in a concise way about the aims of the Cadena and the activities in El Salvador. They say that there should be a coordinated flow of information upon the return of the group and that a manual should be worked out to facilitate immediate responses and appeals if so required.

## TEAM VI - PANAMA<sup>4</sup> AND COSTA RICA, JUNE 4-11

The sixth group came from Costa Rica. Four women represented the Catholic, Pentecostal and Episcopal churches. In their report they gave a detailed account of the activities of every day and listed, like all the others, the various churches and offices visited. They also were particularly impressed by their visit to several orphanages where hundreds of children are taken care of.

In a special event on June 10, the delegation from Costa Rica took part in the inauguration of the National Forum for Peace, called for by the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace." During this forum a proposal presented by the committee was discussed and more than 200 people of consular and governmental organizations as well as some political parties took part. Once the final document is agreed upon, it will be handed over to the Salvadoran government and the FMLN.

The group made two recommendations. One was to call for a "Worldwide Day of Solidarity with the Salvadoran People," and the second to stop the spreading of false information in relation to El Salvador, and to maintain the visits of delegations from abroad. The Costa Rica group addressed the following message to the Salvadoran women:

Beloved Salvadoran women, the Costa Rican delegation sends you its greetings, being part of the *Cadena de la Esperanza* **María Cristina Gómez**. We had the privilege to be invited to this marvelous country to get to know the situation lived by the Salvadoran people and to be in solidarity with them.

We came to El Salvador to learn about the activities, interests and the struggle of the Salvadoran women. We had the opportunity to visit organizations and each one showed great solidarity, fraternal love and a great sense of struggle.

<sup>4</sup> It was unfortunately not possible to include a member from Panama.

Yesterday we discussed a book named "Christ dies every day in Guatemala," and our comment was that actually Christ lives every day in El Salvador, here, his death, the great suffering resulting from family separation, war, unemployment, instability and insecurity for the future seems to germinate like a seed giving fruits. Here the fruit of many religious and secular organizations, working for the well-being of its people, are being collected.

We have seen how the Salvadoran women fight, and we have seen with joy that the historical role played by women is changing. From this very moment on, we felt that woman plays a role at the side of her "compañero" which relation has to turn into a relation of love, mutual respect, sharing the task of constructing a better home, a better society, a better world.

This is our call to the women in El Salvador: To play a leading role in history because Latin America needs it, Central America needs it, El Salvador needs it. Something new and better has to come out of such pain and suffering, such injustice, such struggle. A new world has to grow, a better world for everybody where human beings live under real human conditions.

We send our greetings to all women who struggle day after day, asking them for a moment to "raise their flags," appear as persons and not as objects, to be also a leading element in the construction of a peaceful and just Salvadoran society.

**TEAM VII - FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY,  
FRANCE<sup>5</sup> AND HOLLAND,  
JUNE 11-18**

The seventh group was made up of three members from the Federal Republic of Germany (two from the Lutheran church, and one from the Baptist church) and a member of the Catholic Church Pax Christi in Holland. Each of them sent a very extensive report which was for the most part included in the second report of the Cadena. One of them describes the political situation (*slightly abbreviated*):

Our visit to El Salvador took place in a period of overall transition. Shortly before our arrival, President Cristiani of the right-wing ARENA party took power. The Christian Democrats found themselves for the first time in ten years in the opposition. Whether the US government will or will not continue the (military) aid to the ARENA government is a much discussed topic. Cristiani as a populist shows verbally the political will to dialogue with the armed opposition (FMLN) and to suggest some reforms. But the ultra-right sector within the ARENA chooses to continue the traditional hard line, a military solution for the social, political and economic crisis. Growing ideological differences also exist in the army, but the hard-liners as well as those in favor of dialogue want to keep US military aid.

On 15 June 1989, an anti-terrorist act proposed by the ARENA was surprisingly not (yet) accepted by parliament as expected. In this period of transition, during which the world is watching the steps of the new government, it would have been counterproductive to implement such a law.

During the coming decisive months Cristiani wants to guarantee international financial and political support by talking about reforms and human rights. Daily reality, however, gives a different picture. There was an increase in attacks, disappearances and

<sup>5</sup> It was unfortunately not possible to include a member from France.

detentions and brutal torturing of these people shortly after the elections and before Cristiani took power, when it was not yet clear officially which authority was responsible for what.

Torture has become more sophisticated in El Salvador. Psychological torture is an important element. Beating people without leaving marks has become a well developed technique. Poison is frequently used to force people to make false declarations. It is very hard to find a person who has not personally suffered from the effects of the war. There are people who have lost their whole family because they were all assassinated by death squads.

As far as the FMLN is concerned, it has decided to show its strength to the ARENA government. As long as their peace plans are not taken into consideration their attacks go on, increasingly concentrating on the cities, and during the daytime instead of at night. Recently they criticized themselves for actions that affected the civilian population too much and declared they would alter their tactics.

During our week in El Salvador the daily newspapers gave a lot of publicity to the new regulations of the Migration Service which heavily restrict the legal presence of foreigners in the country. It was stated clearly that these should refrain from politics and not enter the country under the pretext of tourism. Especially Americans, Belgians, Dutch and sometimes Germans were mentioned as being political activists and supporters of the opposition and popular movements, while pretending to be tourists.

Another report includes:

One of the main impressions in El Salvador is that living here is so contradictory. So many people are killed, displaced, bombed and threatened every day, but life goes on. You see people in San Salvador dancing, eating hamburgers, children laughing on their way to school. You see a colorful and noisy market place.

Before visiting the women in the prison, we went to buy cakes and flowers in a rich quarter of town, it could have been for a birthday party. When we reached the prison, I was very surprised

how small it seemed, and there were few soldiers watching it. I thought of German prisons with so many walls, iron doors and controls. A soldier examined our passports without even knowing where to look for the names. All our things and we ourselves got searched, and we were allowed to pass. A fat man in uniform was sitting on a chair calling every name and passport number, which we had to indicate, as he did not understand. One of the Salvadoran women who came with us said about the fat soldier: "Poor boy, the only thing he learns is how to get fat."

We met five imprisoned women, one of them Reina Isabel Hernandez. They told us about the setting up of a small prisoners' union in Ilopango, and of educative theatre plays. They had celebrated the First of May with a small manifestation. They mentioned their struggle to get one of the pavilions for the political prisoners, which also resulted in access to a small kitchen.

All the time when we were talking, laughing, discussing the political situation, I thought that this could not be possible after all that I had read about these women, their horrible treatment, terrible torture and the injustice against women who only wanted to help others to overcome their misery and oppression.

A third report talks about a meeting with people of the Baptist Church, and especially the words of the Baptist pastor referring to a training center for women where 130 of them learn skills in manufacturing clothes and are trained as promoters and leaders in the community:

He said: With all these programs we pursue one goal: to pay the debts the churches have had for centuries toward women. This work with women is a key for tackling the social problems.

The report continues:

I never heard such words from a European pastor, neither from my own church. In a country where "machismo" is an important part of life, also in the churches, I consider it important not only



to hear such words but to see its result in the different programs and projects of women.

A fourth report concentrates on the very cruel aspect of Salvadoran daily reality, namely the forced recruitment of youngsters by the army and also by the guerrillas:

Thousands of crippled boys try to survive after the army does not need them any more. They can be seen in the city of San Salvador, waiting in the street in long queues to be attended by a military hospital doctor. What useless destruction of human capacity for the interest of some, but not for the people of El Salvador.

The saddest victims of the war are the children. We met some of the thousands of orphans in El Salvador in different orphanages. Under poor circumstances, but with great love, the few members of the personnel try to offer whatever help they can. We met children having had the most atrocious experiences to bear for the rest of their lives; children who survived a bombardment where the rest of their families were killed, small children who survived mass execution, (mostly in the northern conflict zones during which their parents were killed), who managed to creep out of a mass grave that was dug before the massacre. Children who no longer talk, who often cry, who cannot even stand on their feet when they come to the orphanage because of malnutrition. Children with sad eyes.

The report ends with recommendations to the future Cadena groups who, it says, should be well prepared to influence churches and governments to stop the war, to seek a peaceful solution and to stop all bilateral aid to the government of El Salvador, as foreign funds never reach the people they are meant for. The NGO's should support popular organizations and protests should continue at every level against the violation of human rights, the report continues. All those with whom the group met, urged, through the Cadena, for the standing up for political prisoners and the many people who have disappeared; to protest against torture, especially for the women for whom it often also means sexual

harassment; for the permanent presence of international delegations; for information campaigns in the churches and for messages of solidarity to the women's organizations in El Salvador.

On 12 and 13 June 1989, a seven-person delegation from the Canadian El Salvador Monitoring Group also visited El Salvador and wrote a very important paper called "Safeguarding Humanitarian Assistance in El Salvador."

## Visit of Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto to Geneva June 22

During the week when the eighth group with women from Brazil was in El Salvador, Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto visited the Ecumenical Center in Geneva on June 22. He said that in El Salvador the church in ecumenical terms had increasingly become a target as a consequence of the churches' accompanying the people.

The CTF members learned that the pattern of the attacks is fairly subtle and sophisticated, the purpose is to create a negative atmosphere with regard to the church. Some days ago a minister, Rodríguez Porth, was assassinated. The reaction of the ARENA was immediate and massive. Again it was stated that violence is promoted by pastors from the churches. The following supposition is likely: Create a negative image of the churches vis-à-vis the population at large, so that they are able to justify really serious acts of violence against the churches.

Another new disturbing element is the attempt by authorities to have full and strict control of all foreigners in the country. Officials have explained that the government will soon issue a form of sworn statement that all foreigners will have to sign, both those who reside in the country or who seek a residence permit, as well as any foreigner who enters the country as visitor, tourist, or similar. This would mean the appearance of such forms of sworn statements in all ports of entry, airports included, for all entering foreigners. The implications would be that foreigners take upon themselves not to visit any office or institution of any of the popular movements, as all of these are "mere fronts for the FMLN." They should keep away from all public demonstrations, even if it is only to look at them.

**TEAM VIII - BRAZIL, JUNE 18-25**

The eighth group included women from the Lutheran, United Presbyterian, Episcopal and Methodist churches. One of them was a CLAI representative. They observed that people are very aware of what is going on in the country. Their visit fell into the period right after the taking over of the government of President Alfredo Cristiani and the assassination of the recently nominated minister, Rodríguez Porth. Responsibility had been given to the FMLN, but the front had formally denied any responsibility.

The groups observed many of the events, judged the situation similarly to preceding groups and was particularly worried that very young people, aged about fourteen years, were recruited for the army.

During their presence in El Salvador, two demonstrations of a very different kind took place. The first on June 22, organized by the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace" in El Salvador, uniting seventy-nine NGOs, to hand over a "Political Platform for Peace" to President Cristiani and the legislative and judicial instances. The platform mainly asks for negotiated solutions to the war, which has lasted for over nine years, and demands various claims of social justice for the population.

This was the first march of its kind under the new government which accused the committee of being the legal representative of the FMLN. President Cristiani did not give any audience that day. Personal contact of the committee with the president is important to establish the conditions of giving the platform to the FMLN, either through a free pass to enter the conflict areas or obtaining permission to hand over the platform to the FMLN outside the country without suffering repression.

The second march took place on June 24 in the cattle-raising sectors and included a display. There was a stark contrast between the two marches. While the first was made up of poor people in a limited area of fifteen to twenty blocks walking peacefully, the second was shocking because of its resourceful and powerful display with horses, fanfares, richly

decorated "balizas" and an armed group hidden in a trailer. Among this extraordinary luxury "the crowd" (representation of the majority) was missing.

The Brazilian delegation considered it to be a privilege to attend both demonstrations which allowed them to see the contrast between an oppressed and a rich class in El Salvador. The first carried palms, peace doves and banderoles. The second, arms with pretentious banners, one of them stating: "We are producing food for the world."

The group says:

The Brazilian delegation believes that the churches and other humanitarian organizations should continue to follow closely the situation in El Salvador, and to support the local organizations which are especially controlled within this small country. We believe that the love of our sisters, through action, will be able to press the Salvadoran government on fundamental human rights, first among them a negotiated peace seeking. The government should be led to recognize the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace" as representing the oppressed Salvadoran sectors.

Another concern of the Brazilian delegation was the security of the coordination team in El Salvador accompanying the different Cadena groups. Specially threatened are the Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal and Catholic churches, the DIACONIA and local LWF World Service office. The Brazilians said they felt that the Cadena should continue so that the foreigners, who are not at all welcome by the government, might exert pressure and make aggression against the threatened institutions more difficult. They should show by their presence in this country that other nations are interested in the destiny of those fighting for human rights in El Salvador.

**TEAM IX - PARAGUAY, URUGUAY AND ARGENTINA  
JUNE 24 - JULY 3**

The ninth group came from the Southern Cone of Latin America and included three women from Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina.

They say (*excerpts*):

We arrived in El Salvador with many recommendations to be careful and not to take along any written material which would compromise us or implicate those working in the country. Aware of methods of repression, and thinking that it might even be worse in El Salvador, we did not take along any background papers or leaflets which would have helped us in our work and in the sharing of experiences....

El Salvador is a country which moved us by its lovely scenery and natural beauty, thus introducing a positive factor into our feelings. The churches are maintaining good ecumenical relationships and impressed us with one voice presenting their common work and the need to work together for peace.

Several persons or groups granted us interviews and commented upon the political situation in the country. While focusing from their own and different work situations, they came to the same objective: El Salvador has been living in a war for close to ten years, but its conflicts date back to the 1930s, due to the social injustice created by the oligarchy and direct intervention of the United States of America.

The repression of people leads to the only possible alternative, namely an option for peace. In this sense, the "National Debate for Peace" was most precise in its goal to call together all sectors of the population with the aim of uniting in the search for peace. Not all of them were so optimistic in believing it possible to reach that goal in a short time, but all underlined that they were moving toward it. We did not find any contradiction in their words; even less between their words and their actions. The FMLN was not presented as an enemy of the people, but it was stressed that it was

necessary to put the option of a peaceful political solution to them.

On first contact with church members we felt complete acceptance among the leaders and at the grass roots. We were deeply touched by the witness of the women, particularly the older ones. The relationships were pleasant, there was interest in letting people have direct contact with us and at no moment were there pretensions to "tell us something that did not exist."

The organizers of the Cadena looked after us much more than expected, paying attention to the very last details also with respect to our security, trying to solve all unforeseen events in order to guarantee the success of the chain. We would like to thank all and everyone for the dedicated and warm fellowship granted to us.

For us it was a very positive experience, because despite everything, people created in us a lot of optimism. We also feel that it was positive because we were able to compare the situation in the Southern Cone, which is similar to the Salvadoran, with the common patterns of a Latin America which bleeds from repression or social injustice.

For this reason we would like to suggest that possibilities be found for continuing exchanges between our countries, between coordinating groups of churches which strive to organize the popular sectors with the aim of creating better alternatives of life.

The talks we had with the family of **María Cristina** sum up the feelings and experiences of the Salvadoran people, the parallel situation of mourning death and rising with more strength to continue the search for a full life, without death, without injustice, without repression:

**María Cristina** died, but her life, her testimony led by her conviction dedicated to the poorest of the poor, the struggling for and with them, revives in them a renewed faith with new hope.

On Saturday, 1 June 1989 the women from Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina sent a message for the "**María Cristina Gómez** Radio Program,"

based on Ruth 2: 9-11.

Watch the field where the men are harvesting,  
and follow along after the girls.  
I have told the men not to touch you.  
And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink  
from the water jars the men have filled.

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground.  
She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes  
that you notice me - a foreigner?"

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have  
done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband.

We wish to share this text with you as if it were a strong hug  
through which we transmit all our feelings.

We are foreigners like Ruth and identify ourselves with her situation as a woman leaving her homeland for an unknown country; not to show our differences, but to share our solidarity in the situation we have to live. We are united, not only in this situation of death, lack of food and insecurity, but also with the option of continuing together and helping each other even in the most hopeless situation, in order to build together this road toward a full life for which we all strive. Ruth was not a woman dominated by fear, her strong faith allowed her to accompany another woman: her mother-in-law who was alone, old, with no possibilities of working and without economic support. Their common weakness brought them together, their suffering made them identify with each other and seek together a solution: the road toward life. We believe that in our situations, yours and ours, we should never lose heart, because there is hope.

We feel in solidarity with you in the hope for peace working toward the welfare of our people. Just as Ruth acted in solidarity with her mother-in-law, we share this feeling. We are united as Latin American sisters. We share the same sorrows, but we also share your hope of a better world and that it can be achieved



through work and much love. The same love expressed by Ruth, a woman like you and me, who worked, who was moved by distress, who never lost hope, who believed in love.

It is today that our peoples are embracing each other and bringing faith and hope which, as we know, can only be reached through love among humans. Our Latin America is more than ever united in the same sufferings for the same hope, but above all in the same faith, as we know that our God will never forsake us.

We would like to leave you our message: Isa. 32: 17-18

The fruit of righteousness will be peace,  
the effect of righteousness will be quietness  
and confidence for ever.

My people will live in peaceful dwelling places,  
in secure homes,  
in undisturbed places of rest.

This is the Word of God.

**TEAM X - ECUMENICAL CENTER STAFF,  
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, JULY 2-9**

The tenth and final group of the Cadena was composed of Ecumenical Center staff members. They came from Argentina, the Federal Republic of Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland.

**Seeking a Symbol**

In two days we, the Ecumenical Center team, will be leaving for El Salvador. We had been thinking of what we could take along. On and off I (Christa Held) was trying to find something which we could give to as many women as possible, as a small, discreet, but clear symbol of our love and concern for them. Today I found it: A marble of transparent glass with several colors inside. This can symbolize that we are all one, regardless of color. A marble in itself is round and beautiful. It is small, but very strong. The transparency is a symbol reflecting that people and God look through us whatever our words and actions may be.

We can give it to those we meet, and to each other. Maybe, after we have gone, one or the other of the women in El Salvador will hold this marble in her hand and feel through it the strength that comes from the solidarity, the oneness of all of us, the love we wanted to share through this **CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA**.

Later the Salvadoran women called it a "bullet of peace" and reminded us that it rolls on. It cannot be stopped.

The group reported:

Our experiences during the first two days of our visit to San Salvador brought us very quickly face to face with the stark reality. While enjoying lunch in the garden of a restaurant shortly after arrival, we became suddenly aware of two bomb explosions and gunfire in very close proximity. Everyone ran for cover into the restaurant's inner courtyard. Astonishingly to us, having just arrived from the outside world, a small boy quite casually said, "It's *just a bomb*."

The following day, when returning with a bus load of singing women and children from the Baptists' recreation house at San Diego Beach, we were caught in an ambush along a stretch of country road, which resulted in the killing of two persons, and the wounding of two others. We heard three different explanations of the incident but suffice it to say here that such an experience brought us very close to the Salvadoran women, a feeling we never lost from that point on during the whole of our visit.

One minute we were joking and laughing, the next we were lying as flat as we could in the bottom of our bus, in the dark and in silence, except for the gunshots 10 meters (33 feet) away, with the possibility of being caught in the crossfire at any minute, or of having our belongings searched if the aggressive parties were to decide to enter the bus. Women tore up the printed information they were carrying and chewed it to avoid the possibility of having the material labeled as "subversive"!

The incident lasted for about twenty-five minutes during which time we held hands with the Salvadorans, among ourselves and with members of the ninth team from Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina who were with us on their last day before returning home. Once back on the road, the confusion gone, everyone was talking again, demonstrative of the enormous strength and very positive attitude of the Salvadoran women that we frequently noted during the time we shared with them.

Those first two incidents illustrated well the pattern of contrasts which lay ahead of us to discover, not only when calm could change to violence in a matter of seconds but also the contrast between such beautiful countryside, such hospitable warmhearted people and the horror of the testimonies we heard about the increasing repression, how close family members, even very young ones, had been captured, tortured or had disappeared. We were told that on the last and the first days of each month, army trucks drive around the town and force young boys to join the army.

Despite the grip of fear in which the people live we were always conscious of smiling faces with never a trace of self-pity.

"Striking contrasts" was a phrase we frequently used not only when describing fast-swinging emotions, but also in describing the situation of the country itself, ravaged by the right and left-wing fighters, unfairly divided between rich and poor and ideologically hit from all sides, North and South, East and West.

We were of course constantly conscious of the ever-present soldiers, the helicopters flying low overhead, often with guns pointing out, not to mention the helicopters which flew in, in the early morning, past our hotel which was near the military hospital. We learned that it is believed that the wounded are transported from the countryside to the hospital during the night to avoid the civilian population knowing how many war casualties there are. There is increasing fear among the population not to be out late in the evenings.

While we were in El Salvador the government introduced a proposal to reform laws in the penal code. This brought about much discussion. There was fear that if these new acts of law were to be passed, there would be dire consequences. They would eliminate all freedom of speech, opinion, organization and association. Any individual could at any time be legally sentenced to heavy prison terms, and any organization declared a criminal association at the mere whim of the authorities. There was fear among the Salvadorans that under the ARENA government the newly proposed reforms of the Salvadoran legislation would very soon be accepted. This would mean legalization of the repression and lead to a decrease in contacts with the outside world, because of the expected tougher restrictions to be imposed on foreigners and outsiders to the conflict.

It was brought to our notice that the US Embassy in San Salvador is believed to have endorsed the new legislation. We took copies back to Geneva and translations and distribution thereof began without delay.

Throughout the reports from the Cadena, mention has been made of the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace." On 4 July 1989 in a deeply moving meeting with representatives of the "National Debate for Peace," the final statement was handed to the Geneva group to be forwarded to the general secretaries of the CLAI, WCC and LWF for distribution and support.

The final statement is divided into an Introduction, a chapter called "The War," another called "Negotiations" with specific recommendations to the economic and social areas. It ends with a "Conclusion" that we would like to quote:

IV. Conclusion: In light of the considerations and given the legal insecurity, fear, anxiety and death that predominate the current situation, we ask the government, the FMLN and the political parties to take into account the following points:

1. The process of dialogue and negotiation must begin immediately and in good faith.
2. There must not be any requirement of preconditions in order to initiate this process.
3. The process of dialogue and negotiations must be carried out in a direct manner between the warring parties.
4. We ask the political parties and the different social and economic sectors of the country to promote the conditions for a direct encounter between the opposing parties.
5. We ask that the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate" be taken into account as an observer of the dialogue and negotiation, and that the Bishops of the Archdiocese of San Salvador be present as witnesses of honor.
6. We ask that efforts be made to reach an overall agreement on a solution to the national problems, starting with:
  - military de-escalation of the war
  - humanization of the armed conflict

- full respect of fundamental and constitutional human rights, and an end of repression and terrorism
- an indefinite cease-fire

And at the same time, that social and economic measures be undertaken that have as a priority the satisfaction of the basic needs of the population.

On 5 July 1989 a thanksgiving service for the Cadena was held in the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection. The biblical reflection was introduced by the Rev. Abelina Centeno de Gómez (wife of Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto). It was understood that this was now the conclusion of the "CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ" which had brought over forty women from twenty-one different countries to El Salvador within ten weeks.

July 6, 1989 was a day of kaleidoscopic impressions. In the morning we met with women from FECMAFAM. We then went to do some shopping, because each of us could carry one bag with food for the women in the Ilopango prison.

We found them at one end of the prison in a somewhat sheltered part, separated from the ordinary prisoners, out in the garden. There were also several other women visitors. We learned quickly that here also a well planned system prevailed. The fourteen women had divided themselves into groups for communication with visitors, education and training, physical exercise, discipline and so on.

After long negotiations, they had obtained permission to all sleep in the same place, have a small kitchen and make use of a corner of a fridge. There were three very young women, fifteen, sixteen and eighteen years old. The older women insisted that these three should stay with them and not be moved to the prison for minors where they would have no protection. The women are requesting a workshop, have some good books and said that the guards "are so dumb that they can hardly judge what is being brought in." Although we were permitted to sit together and talk freely, armed soldiers walking on the roofs and right outside the fence reminded us where we were.

At the end of the visit we said a short prayer together and hugged each other before we left. Walking back to our car, we left the women still behind bars.

*[During our visit to the Ilopango prison, we bought a small juniper tree seedling. We carried it successfully to Geneva when it was 14.5 centimeters (6 inches) high. On 18 September 1990 a little tree of almost 1 meter high was planted in the garden of the Ecumenical Center right in front of the Lutheran wing. We held a short ceremony and prayed for our sisters and friends in El Salvador to mark the occasion.]*

In the evening we went to the cemetery. It is a beautiful place of rolling green grass. There are no grave stones. A little plaque indicates where María Cristina is buried. Some of the most moving words were said by one of her three sons:

Our mother is not dead, it is just her body that rests here. She is present, she is alive in every face in El Salvador and every child. She has brought you here, she still gives us hope.

In the evening we had a meal with Cristina's family and members of the Baptist Church. On that occasion we were presented with a beautiful painted wooden cross with a woman in the middle, illustrating more women at various tasks, symbolizing women's presence in the everyday life and suffering of El Salvador. We were allowed to publish cards, photos and posters of this cross. It has been reprinted many times in different countries. The text, authorized by the artist and the family reads:

A gift from the Baptist Church 'Shalom' and the family of María Cristina Gómez to the CLAI, WCC and LWF for the Cadena de la Esperanza María Cristina Gómez.  
San Salvador, July 6, 1989. (Artist: Fernando Llort.)

This cross found its place in the chapel of the Ecumenical Center. It was placed at the pulpit on 17 November 1989 when staff united in prayer for peace in El Salvador, following the killing of six Jesuit priests in the Catholic University in San Salvador.

### **Evaluation of the "Cadena"**

An evaluation was made on 7 July 1989, carefully prepared by the organizers and those responsible for the Cadena in El Salvador. A report was given on its development. The organizing had been a burden on many people. The evaluation included a critical review of the main achievements and the difficulties, leading to criteria and mechanisms of follow-up:

Salvadoran women and men acclaimed the "overwhelming witness of solidarity" demonstrated by the visiting teams. The chain had also markedly strengthened the ecumenical cooperation and reinforced efforts between churches and the population and organizations in the struggle for peace. It was said that this in a way was also an evaluation of the first thirty-seven days of the ARENA government. Contrary to expectations that the government would introduce new methods more slowly, the first two months had been quite violent. Harsh response was given to violence from the FMLN.

Action is taken against refugees and returnees. The government is giving a hard time to the churches for supporting them and is also trying to legalize repression. It is very important to study the new laws. A seminar has already been held to study the "reforms."

### **Funds or the "Cadena"?**

A question was shared which was sometimes raised abroad. Would the friends in El Salvador rather have received the funds spent on the visit of the Cadena in the country itself? Would they be in greater danger when all the teams had left? The response was that they had asked for this type of assistance, and the reaction they got, the creation of the Cadena, had not only been positive but fast which, it has been mentioned, may be due to the fact that it was done by women for women. Of course, the short timing also caused a few problems, but these were felt to be small in comparison with the results.

They said that the concrete response is a model showing that solidarity, not only financial support, is needed. Money is not evangelism.



Presence is a message, and it has given much strength to men and women, so that faith also has increased!

Finally it had to be decided what the future of the Cadena should be. Formally, the Cadena had been completed with this tenth and final visit. There was a strong plea that a "Chain of Hope" should continue, and include men, but under a new name:

**"CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA POR LA PAZ Y LA VIDA EN EL SALVADOR"**  
**"THE CHAIN OF HOPE FOR PEACE AND LIFE IN EL SALVADOR."**

### **The "Cadena" culminates in nationwide gathering of almost 1,000 Salvadoran women**

The culmination of the Cadena was a meeting of almost 1,000 women from church and popular organizations at the UCA (Catholic University José Simeón Cañas) on 8 July 1989. It was just one more sign of the ability of the women of El Salvador to organize, direct and master their situation. Women had come from all over the country, some had to walk for hours to catch a bus. They had been lodged in different church centers and provided with food during the meeting. A creche was set up for over 200 children. All received a meal ticket for the day, a program and a specially designed poster.

The meeting started with a meditation, led by the Rev. Abelina Centeno de Gómez on the role of women in the Old and the New Testament. It was followed by various speakers, including one from the Minister of Justice on laws pertaining to women and family. In the afternoon several women gave moving and courageous testimonies of their experiences during the last nine years in El Salvador.

One of the organizers arrived with a big bag of marbles, the symbol of the Cadena and spontaneously distributed them among the women present at this nationwide gathering.

The greeting given by the Ecumenical Center team reads as follows:

We greet you in the name of the Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord. We are sorry that not all of us speak Spanish, but that also shows our interdependence, and has no influence on our unity in

spirit. You see only three of us here, but in the CTF in Geneva we are seven women. Even if all seven of us were here, it would only be a symbol of joint action of the Latin American Council of Churches, World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. Together these bodies represent more than 350 churches around the world, and 400 million Christians who through the Cadena express their solidarity with you at this moment. You have seen forty-three women from twenty-one different nations in the last ten weeks. Each of them has demonstrated love, understanding, solidarity and affirmation in your longing and search for peace.

The Cadena has been an experience of mutual sharing. You and we have received strength and courage and we have a deep admiration for all of you who continue to live in this country without resignation despite all the problems.

What has been special about the "Cadena"?

It is a fact that it was planned and carefully thought through by women. We have heard many wonderful words about this action of women which holds promise for the future. We hope that this will not remain just words but will influence your daily life and activities. We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the fellowship we have received today. We were moved by the song with which you opened this spiritual encounter "Vienen con alegría, Señor."

When we went across the Ilopango lake to visit a resettlement community, a group met us at the shore and led us to a small altar under a tree, singing the same song. We will keep it as a motto of our ultimate aim to confess our faith with joy under the guidance and protection of our Lord.

We have said on many occasions that we have admired the strength of women in this country, but you are not only strong, you are beautiful like this land.

The present Cadena has fulfilled its aim and is completed, but it

will go on under a new name:

**'CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA POR LA PAZ Y LA VIDA EN EL SALVADOR.'**

May God bless this country and its people and may God give it peace with justice.

You know that there has been an overall biblical motto for the Cadena and a motto for every week. We will leave with you the motto of the CADENA DE LA ESPERANZA MARIA CRISTINA GOMEZ, Josh. 1: 9:

**"Be strong and of good courage,  
be not frightened,  
neither be dismayed,  
for the Lord your God is with you  
wherever you go."**

On 11 July 1989 an open hearing was held in the Ecumenical Center in Geneva which was very well attended and was followed by a number of press releases by different organizations in the center and in the local newspapers.

On 20 July 1989 there was an all-day retreat of the members of the Geneva CTF to evaluate the material and prepare the second mailing of the reports of the different teams. The proposed reform of the laws and various papers and assessments are being studied, involving to a large extent the Human Rights Desks of the WCC, CLAI and LWF. Delegations continue to visit El Salvador.

On 2 August 1989 a letter with many enclosures was mailed to all participants and coordinators of the Cadena reporting on what had happened during the weeks of May 1 - July 10. A communiqué was received from the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace" and the general command of the FMLN about a meeting held 12-13 July 1989 in Panama City, where the FMLN expressed its conviction that the government of El Salvador lacked the will to become engaged in a real process for a negotiated political solution to the civil war. However, both the "Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace"

and the FMLN concur that there is a need to continue increasing efforts toward making the aspirations for peace and social justice of the Salvadoran people a reality.

On 28 August 1989 full documentation was mailed by the executive director of DIACONIA, sharing the final evaluation and information about the Cadena including a number of photos from the Women's Convention held 8 July 1989.

Various letters were received by the CTF in Geneva from friends in El Salvador who had been engaged and involved in the Cadena. There was renewed repression in late August. On September 9 several members of the Baptist church were detained as well as a number of health workers and on September 12, an urgent appeal was made by a number of women's groups in El Salvador. The churches were again the victims of defamation and violent captures under false accusations of supporting the FMLN. In face of this new violation of women and people's rights, they asked that messages be sent to authorities, asking for immediate and safe relief. They requested that this information be communicated to the whole Cadena network.

Although detentions and disappearances were on the increase, [according to reports, in one week alone, 400 political captures, among them many members of the FENASTRAS (National Federation of Salvadoran Workers)], refugees living in Honduras were starting to plan to go home during the months of October, November and December with the aid of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

On 14 November 1989 attacks also were made by the Salvadoran military against international workers who had been in El Salvador since 1980. Many compared these actions with the attacks made in the years 1983 and 1984.

The churches offer refuge to the hundreds of displaced who need food, clothing and medical attention. More and more people, active during the past months and during the Cadena, were forced to leave El Salvador.

On 15 November 1989, another circular together with enclosures was sent to all Cadena participants and coordinators, appealing especially

for Martha Elena Rodríguez de López and Alicia Elizabeth Mendes Rosales.

On 16 November 1989 news was received that a number of foreign church workers had been arrested at 5 p.m. in the capital. Also the Treasury police had searched different churches, Catholic refugee centers, and similar places during this time. Relatives of some of the political prisoners in the women's prison at Ilopango tried to go to the prison but could not reach Ilopango because of the fighting and attacks along the road from San Salvador to Ilopango. During forty-eight hours, air attacks in the city increased. There were continued attacks and machine-gunning was seen from forty-seven helicopters during the night of November 15 through the early morning of November 16. Several attacks also took place in different parts of the city on November 16.

The "community military" had come in and forcibly evacuated the population. By 4 p.m. on 16 November 1989, the Catholic church alone had twenty-seven refugee centers in churches, schools and community centers, sheltering 9,300 refugees. There was an urgent need for medical supplies, as the hospitals did not have sufficient for all the wounded and had to turn patients away. The food stores were nearly empty.

Also on 16 November, Pope John Paul II appealed for an immediate end to the fighting in El Salvador, where more than 650 people had died in six days. The worst act of brutality on 16 November was the assassination of six Jesuit priests from the Catholic University (UCA) around 3 a.m.

An intercession was held at the Ecumenical Center on 17 November 1989. It was also agreed that the CTF would start to meet again every Tuesday from 12:30 to 14:00. An update on events and actions was sent to the participants and coordinators every week and, every Thursday, a message to the sisters and brothers in El Salvador.

Strong appeals were sent by the general secretaries of the CLAI, LWF and WCC to President Cristiani, to the general command of the FMLN, to the UN General Secretary and to the US Government. These called for an end to hostilities and a commitment to a negotiated settlement.

The message to US President George Bush says:

Your increased support of the Salvadoran military at this time is incomprehensible. It can only prolong the brutal repression by the military which has already caused great loss of life among the civilian population. With profound shock and urgency we ask you to use your influence to bring an immediate end to the bloodshed in El Salvador.

On December 4, the LWF general secretary wrote a letter to LWF member churches, national committees and related agencies also quoting in some detail events between November 15-27 that had gone down in history as the "El Salvadoran Emergency."

### **Government Against Church**

Under cover of the present conflict, the Salvadoran government has stepped up its repressive measures against the church, among them the following:

- On November 15, soldiers threw a hand grenade into the parish center of St. Mary's Mother of the Poor in the Soyapango area of El Salvador, causing many casualties and destroying the church which was home to 300 refugees.
- On November 15-16, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist parishes were raided by the military across the country. Church workers and refugees were harassed, detained and physically abused.
- On November 16, eight members of the Jesuit community, including six priests, their housekeeper and her fifteen-year-old daughter, were tortured and murdered at the priory of the José Simeón Cañas University (UCA) in San Salvador. One of the priests, a university rector, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, and colleague of Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto, had been actively engaged in the work of peace and reconciliation. Father Ellacuría had recently received the LWF-Roman Catholic delegation at the priory. The eulogy at the funeral, delivered by Bishop Gómez, contains a hard message.
- On the same day, National Guard soldiers surrounded the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, detaining Salvadoran and international

church workers. The Salvadorans were released after physical abuse. The internationals were given notice to leave the country immediately.

- Informed that his fate would be the same as that of the Jesuits, Bishop Gómez was forced into hiding. As the search for him by the Salvadoran death squads intensified, and following an emergency meeting of his church council, Bishop Gómez left the country to join his already departed family.
- On November 20 the Salvadoran military raided the Episcopal church of St. John the Evangelist which had been a center for refugees. They ransacked the files and arrested Father Luis Serrano, head of the Episcopal Service Agency (CREDHO), along with twelve other Salvadorans and seven international church workers.
- On November 21 the military raided the Mennonite Church offices in San Salvador, arresting Salvadoran and international workers.
- On November 23 the Legislative Assembly voted in favor of sweeping reforms in the Salvadoran penal code. Under the new "anti-terrorism" laws, persons suspected of being "subversive" could now, without evidence, be imprisoned for three to five years.
- On November 27 the home of the LWF Department for World Service representative in El Salvador, the Rev. Philip Anderson, was ransacked. The next day the housekeeper of Bishop Medardo Gómez Soto was interrogated by the military. The Gómez home was occupied by forty soldiers who proceeded to destroy its contents.

In the following weeks, a number of letters were received from members of the Cadena, giving news about people and reporting on activities undertaken in their home countries, in Europe, North America and Latin America. This was encouraging at a time when peace seemed so far away from a country and people that had grown so close to many hearts.

## AFTERWORD

This documentation was completed in August 1990 and edited in the spring of 1993. Too many events and tasks prevented an earlier careful re-reading, reflection and rethinking of what took place when this Cadena came to life and grew. Much still needs to be done. This report is a reminder of what a Cadena-(Chain) is:

One single piece, closely connected to the one before and the one that follows, makes a chain. Each link, big or small, is important. It is nothing on its own, it is one small element, but indispensable as it is. Those who were involved in the Cadena were enriched, although they took part in the suffering of people to a degree that many had never before experienced.

None of the forty-three women who participated from the outside and also those from within Salvador will ever completely forget this unique experience.

We wish again to thank wholeheartedly all the sisters and brothers in El Salvador for the way they received us, for their warmth, their frankness, their confidence. We will continue to pray for them - now that a new, more peaceful chapter in the history of El Salvador has begun.

The biblical motto of the Cadena still stands:

**"Be strong and be of good courage,  
be not frightened,  
neither be dismayed,  
for the Lord your God  
is with you wherever you go"**  
(Josh. 1:9.)



### **Salvadoran women are freed from Ilopango prison**

At the beginning of 1991 the CTF members joyously welcomed Margarita Alemán at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva. She was in Geneva to attend the United Nations Commission on Human Rights meeting as member of a group of non-governmental organizations representing El Salvador.

Margarita is one of the fourteen women who were being held as "political" prisoners in the Ilopango prison during the time of the Cadena team visits there.

In Geneva, she told us that all those women prisoners are now free. She said that it had been possible because of the amount of international pressure that had been put on the Salvadoran government to release them.



**Margarita Alemán and juniper tree  
at Ecumenical Center, Geneva (*see p.58*)**



Cadena Task Force members meet with the team from Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, in San Salvador (*see p.54*).



Some of the almost 1,000 Salvadoran women gathered at the José Simeón Cañas Catholic University on 8 July 1989 (*see p.60*).



The banner behind the speakers' platform at the gathering at the José Simeón Cañas Catholic University





Salvadoran woman leads singing  
at Ilopango lake resettlement community (*see p.61*)



**María Cristina Gómez**



The grave of **María Cristina Gómez**

"...It is just her body that rests here. She is present, she is alive in every face in El Salvador and every child. She has brought you here, she still gives us hope."  
*(Words spoken by one of her three sons, see p.58.)*

## ABBREVIATIONS

|                  |                                                                                                                              |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ADEMUSA</b>   | Association of Salvadoran Women                                                                                              |
| <b>ANDES</b>     | a teachers' union                                                                                                            |
| <b>ARENA</b>     | National Republican Alliance                                                                                                 |
| <b>CLAI</b>      | Latin American Council of Churches                                                                                           |
| <b>CNR</b>       | Repatriates and Repopulation Committee                                                                                       |
| <b>COACES</b>    | an agricultural cooperative                                                                                                  |
| <b>CODYDES</b>   | Union of Unemployed and Laid-off Workers                                                                                     |
| <b>CONAMUS</b>   | National Coordination of Salvadoran Women                                                                                    |
| <b>CREDHO</b>    | Episcopal Service Agency                                                                                                     |
| <b>CRIPDES</b>   | Displaced Persons Committee                                                                                                  |
| <b>CTF</b>       | Cadena Task Force                                                                                                            |
| <b>DIACONIA</b>  | Ecumenical Coordination of Service and Humanitarian Aid of El Salvador                                                       |
| <b>FECMAFAM</b>  | Federation of Committees of Mothers and Family Members of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Killed Persons of El Salvador |
| <b>FENASTRAS</b> | National Federation of Salvadoran Workers                                                                                    |
| <b>FMLN</b>      | Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front                                                                                    |
| <b>FUSS</b>      | a trade union                                                                                                                |
| <b>LWF</b>       | The Lutheran World Federation                                                                                                |
| <b>MSM</b>       | Salvadoran Movement of Women                                                                                                 |
| <b>NGO</b>       | non-governmental organization                                                                                                |
| <b>WCC</b>       | World Council of Churches                                                                                                    |